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## Cyberbullying victimization, counterproductive work behaviours and emotional intelligence at workplace

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### Abstract

As a new and inquiring concept, cyberbullying has attracted many researchers from a variety of disciplines. However, a specific context of the cyberbullying concept, workplace cyberbullying and its impact on employees' behaviors has rarely been theoretically reported in the literature. Addressing this particular gap in the literature, we develop a conceptual model encapsulating the relationship between workplace cyberbullying and counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) and the role of employees' emotional intelligence on this relationship in particular. This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, the theoretical framework proposed highlights the effects of workplace cyberbullying on employees' CWBs (i.e. CWB towards people (CWB-P) and CWB towards organization (CWB-O)). Hence the focus is, on distinguishing workplace cyberbullying from other cyberbullying types, and building a theoretical background for the relationship of workplace cyberbullying and CWBs variables. Second, based on Wong and Law's model this study aims to assess the possible role of emotional intelligence to eliminate undesirable behaviors at work. Thus we propose that having a high degree of emotional intelligence (EI) gives the employees the ability to handle workplace stressors better. Third, this research integrates organizational behavior literature to the emotional intelligence literature through offering a theoretical framework where employees' emotional intelligence is a process consisting of 1) others' emotion appraisal, 2) use of emotion, 3) self-emotion appraisal, and 4) regulation of emotion which allow them to deal with cyberbullying as a negative organizational behavior.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the last decade information and communications technology (ICT), which refers to the umbrella term that includes any communication device or application (e.g. cellular phones, computer and network hardware and software) (Lugeiyamu, 2013), has completely changed the way employees communicate with each other in the workplace, which provided bullies an alternative way to target their victims (Zhang and Leidner, 2014; Lim and Teo,

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2009). This new phenomenon was described as cyberbullying (Privitera and Campbell, 2009). While previous studies typically framed definitions of cyberbullying as a youth problem (Kowalski et al., 2014), a few studies addressed cyberbullying in adults (Aboujaoude et al., 2015). Specifically, recent findings suggested that the increase in cyberbullying victims in workplace is a serious problem which is directly associated with the increased use of ICT (Snyman and Loh, 2015). In this sense, little research has been conducted on adult cyberbullying experiences and especially on workplace cyberbullying, which makes it a greenfield area for research (Madan, 2014).

In the contemporary hi-tech work environment, there is considerable evidence that cyberbullying has morphed into the preferred mode or style of harassment amongst employees (Piotrowski, 2012). Due to the complexity and relative newness of this phenomenon, there is an ongoing debate on the definition of workplace cyberbullying in the previous studies. Workplace cyberbullying can be defined as being exposed to repeated negative treatment from colleagues by electronic forms of contact over a long period of time. Workplace cyberbullying causes high levels of stress on many employees. Stress is a natural human response to threatening or challenging situations, but excessive levels can be harmful to the physical, emotional and mental health of an employee, as well as negatively affecting his/her motivation and performance (Snyman and Loh, 2015).

Counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) is the intentional endangerment of workplace outcomes and normal functioning and it has been shown that CWB is associated with productivity and efficiency. Workplace conflict is known to be associated with elevated levels of CWB, as it results in employees looking for revenge on the perceived perpetrators of the conflict (Madan, 2014). As nowadays workplace cyberbullying is the rising star of workplace conflict, it would be appropriate to consider it as an impulsion for CWB.

Many researchers imply that when employees are exposed to undesired behaviours from other individuals in workplace they use their emotional intelligence to overcome the stressful situation (Gohm, Corser and Dalsky, 2005). Indeed, emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to respond emotional, social, and environmental conditions. Previous research revealed that employees with high levels of emotional intelligence were more positive and creative (Jung and Yoon, 2012). Workplace cyberbullying victimization experience causes excessive stress which has hazardous effects on employees, resulting in a way of protest through CWBs. But employees with high levels of EI might seek for an alternative solution other than deviant workplace behaviours.

In this regard, this paper aims to point at the relationships among workplace cyberbullying, CWB and EI. Therefore, this paper investigates theoretically: 1) workplace cyberbullying and its distinctive characteristics, 2) the relationship between workplace cyberbullying and CWBs, and 3) the role of EI in the relationship between workplace cyberbullying and CWBs.

## **2. Background and Relevant Literature**

### *2.1. Workplace Cyberbullying Victimization and Consequences*

In today's technology driven organizations, the power of ICT is available on each desktop and to any level of the organization ladder. While ICT spells productivity and profitability, unchecked and unregulated, it can include all of the ingredients for disaster. As today's workplace is changing, harassment is also changing. While the basis of work and harassment has not changed, technology is changing the way both are done (Borstorff, Graham and Marker, 2007). The resulting phenomenon of workplace cyberbullying is accepted as an elevating and urgent problem being faced by employees and employers (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2013). Zhang and Leidner (2014) defined workplace cyberbullying as "occasions where an employee is systematically exposed to repeated negative treatment from supervisors, colleagues or subordinates by electronic forms of contact over a long period of time, in a situation in which the perpetrator has more power than the target". Although workplace cyberbullying is closely related to traditional workplace bullying, it has many distinguishing features. It is hard for victims to avoid the cyberbullying as they have to receive e-mail or text messages for their work. Cyberbullying may happen at any time of the day and in any place. It is hard for the victims to avoid the perpetrators without abandoning ICT. As a result, cyberbullying lasts even when victims are away from their work (Zhang and Leidner, 2014; Ak, Özdemir and Kuzucu, 2015). Additionally, some cyberbullying behaviours, such as posting an inappropriate picture of someone in social media, may extend a much larger audience. As every post triggers responses of other individuals, a ripple effect occurs which

is more damaging to the victims (Sabella, Patchin and Hinduja, 2013; Mehdad and Nezhad, 2014). For this reason, the speed of information sharing is much faster than traditional bullying (Chao et al., 2014).

Cyberbullying studies, as in the case of traditional bullying, initially focused on children and adolescents (Privitera and Campbell, 2009). Research on workplace cyberbullying is relatively slow to commence. There is an abundance of literature on child and adolescent cyberbullying victimization and perpetration. Most of the research on cyberbullying aims to identify the antecedents and consequences of both victimization and perpetration (Samnani and Singh, 2012). Erdur-Baker and Tanrikulu (2010) investigated the relations of cyberbullying experiences of Turkish secondary school children to demographic variables and depressive symptoms, finding that age and gender were related to being a cyberbully while victimization was regardless of age and gender. Also their results indicated that victims showed higher levels of depressive symptoms. Ang and Goh (2010) showed the relation between low empathy and cyberbullying. As there is no agreement on the definition and components of cyberbullying, research so far does not go beyond an effort to put together the pieces of this puzzle. On the other hand, studies including young adults and workplace cyberbullying are very few and as most of it being conceptual, there is a need for empirical studies to shed light on this uprising phenomenon.

Employees monitor their work environment, stimuli and information are continually perceived and appraised. When employees perceive a threat, it will be seen as stressful and cause a response (Lim and Teo, 2009). Cyberbullying is a major workplace stressor for employees (Snyman and Loh, 2015). Cyberbullying is called an invisible fist. Most researchers suggest that if individuals are the object of negative behaviour in the workplace, most of them will react emotionally. Psychological research into the consequences bullying victimization showed that after being bullied, victims usually have physiological symptoms, such as stress, anxiety, tension, fear, depression, loss of confidence, low job satisfaction, and decreased commitment to the organization (Chao et al., 2014). Cyberbullying bystanders or witnesses who feel powerless against the perpetrator to help their coworker may be as affected as the victim. Studies showed that consequences related to work can be as severe for witnesses as for the victims and as witnesses may also feel threatened they may consider leaving the organization (Zhang and Leidner, 2014; Madan, 2014). Witnessing bullying in the workplace may also badly effect the psychological well-being of employees, eventually causing a decrease in staff morale, job satisfaction and commitment levels (Privitera and Campbell, 2009).

Organizations do not treat workplace cyberbullying behaviours as corporate crimes, but they can result in hostile work climate and may violate organizational policies and norms (Zhang and Leidner, 2014). The impact of workplace bullying on organizational level is an elevated rate of absenteeism which will consequently have negative impacts upon profitability, productivity and efficiency. It would be appropriate to expect workplace cyberbullying to have similar impacts. Low workplace morale may result in high staff turnover rates and even quitting, which will necessitate recruitment of new employees and training processes that are costly and time consuming (Privitera and Campbell, 2009). Traditional bullying is more contained spatially, therefore stays as an intraorganizational issue. On the other hand, cyberbullying permeates beyond organizational boundaries. As organizational matters become public organizational reputation could be damaged severely (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2013).

## *2.2. Counterproductive Work Behaviors and Antecedents*

Our understanding of CWBs progressively developed in recent years. CWBs are defined as "deliberate behaviour of employees that violates significant organizational policies and norms, thereby, damages the wellbeing of the organization and/or its employees" (Jung and Yoon, 2012; Raver, 2013; Cohen, 2016). Kelloway et al. (2010) suggested that some acts may be perceived as counterproductive for the organization but they could be productive for an employee or a group of employees. CWBs may include deviational behaviours such as shirking, working slowly, intentional lateness and absence, theft, as well as aggressive or violent behaviour toward coworkers and customers such as verbal abuse, gossip, bullying, mobbing, retaliation, intimidation and sexual harassment (Jung and Yoon, 2012; Spector, 2011; Salami, 2010; Aldea-Capotescu, 2013). CWBs encompass the dark side of employee behavior and describe the full scope of deviant, dysfunctional, aggressive, uncivil, abusive, and undermining employee behaviours in organizational contexts (Raver, 2013).

Some researchers proposed that CWBs emerge from confusion in human relations and a lack of autonomy, whereas others suggested that personal traits of employees like emotions were determinants of CWBs (Jung and Yoon, 2012).

Kelloway et al. (2010) proposed that CWBs can be viewed as a form of protest behaviour in which employees try to redress, draw attention to, or show their dissatisfaction with events occurring in the organization. Recently some researchers suggested that CWBs could be collected into two distinct groups based on their targets and antecedents. For example, there is research tying justice more to CWBs directed toward organizations (CWB-O) (e.g. damaging organizational properties or put little effort into work) and interpersonal conflict more to CWBs directed toward other people (CWB-P) (e.g. cursing at or making fun of someone at work). Also research revealed that conflict with colleagues was more likely to result in CWB-P, however, conflict with supervisors was more likely to result in CWB-O (Spector and Fox, 2010; Cohen, 2016).

Although there is a growing interest in CWB as a research subject, little is known about its determinants. The relationships found between CWBs and organizational injustice differs from weak to moderate. In addition, no significant correlation between demographic variables and CWBs were found. Finding suggested that aggression and workplace harassment were moderately related to CWBs (Cohen, 2016). Also Spector et al. (2006) investigated the relationship between CWBs and variables including interpersonal conflict, organizational constraints, injustice, job satisfaction, emotions. Salami (2010) found that job stress has significant association with CWBs, and in addition, negative affectivity was positively correlated with CWBs. However, there is a limited number of research investigating the motives for production deviance or sabotage dimensions. Some researchers claimed that theft can occur as an aggression act against an organization. They proposed a number of potential causes of theft including injustice, work environment, job dissatisfaction, and stress. Although injustice could be considered to affects theft as a stressor causing anger and other negative emotions, it is also possible that an individual steal to achieve a state of equity. It is possible that withdrawal is motivated by a desire to harm the organization, or simply occur as a result of workplace stress and interpersonal conflict. As withdrawal is an attempt to avoid a situation rather than inflict direct harm, it contrasts with other forms of CWBs. Thus an employee might wish to avoid workplace stressors, organizational injustice, dissatisfaction or situations that include negative emotions (Spector et al., 2006; Spector and Fox, 2010; Spector, 2011).

### *2.3. The Role of Emotional Intelligence on Undesired Behaviors in Workplace*

According to the researchers EI has a potential to contribute to more positive attitudes, behaviours and outcomes (Sony and Mekoth, 2016). Jung and Yoon (2012) defined EI as "the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth". Individuals with high levels of EI are commonly more aware of their own emotions and can handle and express their emotions effectively (Lomas et al., 2012). During the development of adolescents, researchers suggested that EI was integral for successful social interactions. Adolescents with highly developed EI skills shows enhanced emotional awareness, are better at decision making and they have improved conflict resolution (Schokman et al., 2014). Previous studies have revealed that females have higher EI levels and EI scores of individuals grow with age (Baroncelli and Ciucci, 2014).

Wong and Law (2002) conceptualized EI as a multidimensional concept consisting of four aspects: 1) others' emotion appraisal, 2) use of emotion, 3) self-emotion appraisal, and 4) regulation of emotion. The EI dimensions shown to overlap with empathy, which is the ability to comprehend and re-experience the emotions of another individual, as they are involved in the use of emotions and facilitate positive relationships with others (Schokman et al., 2014). Individuals who are better at perceiving, understanding, using, and managing emotions of their own and others' are more likely to be psychologically adjusted. Empirical studies showed a positive relationship between EI and social function and quality of social relationships, and also a negative relationship between EI and a number of negative interactions and conflicts in social relations (García-Sancho, Salguero and Fernández-Berrocal, 2014).

Employees with well-developed EI skills along with positive personality traits and intellect, found to be more successful at work, including interpersonal relationships and work related problem solving. Employees tend to maintain more positive affective states if they have high levels of EI, use their emotions to manage workplace challenges and keep themselves and others in positive moods, and handle emotions while motivating those around them towards a goal (Wan, Downey and Stough, 2014). Specifically, employees with high EI levels are thought to be more affective in handling stress and its negative effects, and more aware of their own emotions. Having low EI, on

the other hand, may lead to negative attitudes such as isolating or withdrawing from work, as it is harder for those employees to engage in positive managing behaviours (Wan, Downey and Stough, 2014). Researchers suggested that if employee's EI is improved, deviant behaviours related to organizational tasks would be significantly reduced, which reveals negative relationships of EI with employee's deviating behaviours (Jung and Yoon, 2012). Jung and Yoon (2012) found that three of the dimensions of EI -others' emotion appraisal, use of emotion and self-emotional appraisal- have a remarkably negative effect on CWBs. Especially, others' emotion appraisal had the greatest effect on CWBs, which indicates that, if employee's perceiving and understanding others' emotions ability is not sufficient, then the influence on CWBs will be more adverse (Jung & Yoon, 2012). Studies have also revealed an interaction between personal traits and workplace stressors and CWBs. For instance, negative emotions of employees were shown to be mediators between workplace stressors and CWBs (Chernyak-Hai and Tziner, 2014).

### **3. Discussion and Implications**

In this study we approached cyberbullying phenomenon as the rising star of workplace stressors. As Snyman and Loh (2015) suggested, cyberbullying is not just a phase in adolescence, it can be carried forward into adulthood and into the workplace. Literature on antecedents and consequences of workplace cyberbullying is extremely scarce. Thus, this study provides another piece to the puzzle by demonstrating the relationship between workplace cyberbullying, CWBs and EI.

This study provides a conceptual insight on workplace cyberbullying dynamics, by establishing its relation to CWBs. CWBs are still a hot topic of research as there are a limited number of research in literature providing knowledge about its relation to other variables. Spector et al. (2006) investigated the relationships between the CWB dimensions including abuse, production deviance, sabotage, theft, and withdrawal as well as CWB-O and CWB-P, and other variables such as interpersonal conflict, organizational constraints, distributive justice, and procedural justice. They found that abuse had the strongest correlations for stressors, justice and negative emotions, and it correlated most strongly with interpersonal conflict. This corroborates with the assumption of bullying research that victim eventually becomes the bully. Cyberbullying victimization at workplace has a good potential to be an antecedent of CWBs, as it would load the employee a great deal of stress, identical to the effect of other well studied workplace stressors, such as traditional bullying. In this study we also propose that workplace cyberbullying victimization is positively related to both CWB-P and CWB-O separately. Spector et al. (2006) showed that CWB-O tended to correlate more strongly with emotion and job satisfaction than did CWB-P. These findings support our suggestion.

CWBs have a remarkable impact on both organizations and other employees. Thus, it is obligatory to understand how to prevent these deviant behaviours and identify employees who are more likely to enact them (Bolton, Becker and Barber, 2010). This study draws attention to the considerable effect of EI levels of employees on deviant behaviours. Research on children, adolescents and adults exhibited that higher EI levels were associated with less aggressive conduct, in terms of both physical and verbal aggression (García-Sancho, Salguero and Fernández-Berrocá, 2014). Kelloway et al. (2010) proposed that individuals are highly sensitive to violation of moral or ethical standards. Previous research findings supported that perceived injustice starts a protest reflex. Injustice leads to negative feelings and consequently to CWBs (Fida et al., 2015). This study also appropriates the view that when employees have low emotional control, they are likely to fail in social interactions and experience negative emotions, resulting in CWBs. This leads to the conclusion that employees with low levels of EI have a high level of possibility to enact CWBs.

Under the light of previous literature, this study demonstrates that it is utmost important to understand workplace cyberbullying phenomenon which has drastic effects on employees and take precautions to prevent it. Understanding the relationship of EI and job stressors such as workplace cyberbullying with CWBs may enable organizations to develop better coping strategies and avoid future conflicts and reduce decreases in productivity.

### **4. Conclusion**

Since it is a relatively new phenomenon, there is a limited number of studies on workplace cyberbullying. It has been shown that workplace cyberbullying had atrocious effects on employees' physical and psychological wellbeing. The unique characteristics of cyberbullying lets it permeate to the employee's personal life, as there is no escape from

technology, which causes the feeling of being trapped. This feeling is the impulsion of stress driven deviant behaviours such as CWBs. CWBs are costly to both employees and organization, therefore, its antecedents should be defined and strategies should be developed to cope with it. As one of the well accepted antecedents of CWBs, stress is an increasingly rising matter at today's competitive workplace. Organizations may not be able to clear off or monitor all the sources of stress, especially when it comes to interpersonal conflict in the form of cyberbullying as the bullying goes beyond the workplace and penetrate into the personal life of the victim. In this regard, best coping strategy would be arranging training programs to increase the EI of the employees or preferring to recruit candidates with high levels of EI at the first place. Thus, employees with high levels of EI could handle the stress by their own. In this study, we demonstrate a conceptual model of relationships between workplace cyberbullying victimization, CWB and EI proposing that workplace cyberbullying victimization is positively related to CWB and its variables, and high levels of EI has a negative impact on this relationship. Moreover, we propose that variables of EI has different impacts on the relation between workplace cyberbullying victimization and CWB. This conceptual research is desired to be a starting point of empirical research on cyberbullying and its relation to EI and CWBs and we are planning to conduct a research in a chosen organization to identify these relations adding one more star into the dark sky of cyberbullying phenomenon.

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